

Congressman Pete Stark has recently been notified by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) that seniors who choose to leave their Medicare+Choice HMO in the month of December to return to traditional fee-for-service Medicare will be able to purchase a supplemental Medigap plan on a guaranteed issue basis. Seniors who leave their Medicare+Choice plan by December 31, 2001 will have until March 4, 2002 to purchase one of the four most popular Medigap policies (A, B, C or F) without having their premiums based on their individual health status.

Rep. Stark stated, "In my Congressional district and across California, the costs of participating in Medicare HMOs have gone up dramatically. There are new hospital deductibles, reductions in prescription drug benefits, new cost-sharing requirements for dialysis, increases in cost-sharing for Medicare-covered cancer drugs and self-injectable medications, and many more. Depending on your health needs, returning to traditional Medicare with a guaranteed issue Medigap policy may be a better option for you."

HMOs nationwide have scheduled large cost-sharing and premium increases and benefit reductions starting in January, causing many seniors to reconsider their healthcare options. Because these changes were announced late this year, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson declared the month of December a "Special Enrollment Period" to give Medicare beneficiaries more time to choose their healthcare plans for 2002.

"California seniors who are rightfully unhappy with the increasing costs and reduction in benefits in their Medicare HMOs should take note of this announcement," Rep. Stark said. "This protection to purchase a guaranteed issue Medigap policy is only available if you disenroll from your Medicare HMO by December 31, 2001. But, don't do anything rash. Please talk to your family, your physician, or a counselor with the California Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program (1-800-434-0222) to make sure such a change is right for you," cautioned Rep. Stark.

Congressman Stark has been a consistent critic of the problems surrounding the Medicare+Choice program. He recently released a GAO report revealing that payment increases to Medicare+Choice HMOs totaling \$1 billion in 2001 had little effect on Medicare+Choice benefits or plan availability. He has also introduced H.R. 3267, the Medicare+Choice Consumer Protection Act, which would extend new consumer protections to the program, including making this special enrollment period available whenever Medicare HMOs increase cost-sharing or reduce benefits.

Rep. Stark concluded, "I appreciate the special election period that Secretary Thompson

instituted for Medicare beneficiaries this year. However, this shouldn't be a one-time option. Beneficiaries should always be protected to find alternative coverage if their Medicare HMO is not meeting their needs. I urge the Secretary to support reforms like those in the Medicare+Choice Consumer Protection Act."